



# UNDERSTANDING SAMUEL BECKETT'S ENDGAME WITH REFERENCE TO MARTIN ESSLIN'S ESSAY, THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

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## INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of Existentialism unquestionably had the most significant effect on the literature and the comprehensive view of the world and human life of the 20th century. This movement officially began during the times of World War I. However, it is considered as a resurgence of the ideas given by the philosophers of the 19th century. Existentialism is thus a 20th century philosophical movement embracing diverse doctrines but centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe and the plight of the individual who must assume ultimate responsibility for acts of free will without any knowledge of what is right or wrong. The 19th century philosophers, Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche came to be seen as precursors of the movement.

In the 20th century, the world had been a witness to the two World Wars. Everything was brought close to annihilation. People had started questioning the existence of God. During this time, the two major philosophers were Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. However, Existentialism was seen as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one. Sartre's own ideas were and are better known through his fictional works such as *Nausea* and *No Exit*. What is central to Sartre's idea of Existentialism is the human experience and he looked at man's active role in forging his identity. Albert Camus, however, differed from Sartre. He said that our actions lack importance. His philosophy was that look for purpose in life in a universe which is meaningless in itself. Camus wrote the very popular essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus* which posed one of the best known existentialist question- "There is only one really philosophical question and that is suicide". His philosophy of the absurd has left us with a striking image of human fate: Sisyphus endlessly pushing the rock up the mountain only to see it roll down, each time he gets to the top. It is an eternal and endless cycle. This picture, according to Camus, represents the human condition in a world where we can no longer make sense of events; however, rather than commit suicide (the "only truly serious philosophical problem"), we should reconcile ourselves to this "elusive feeling of absurdity" and bear it as best we can.

With Camus' essay, what gained popularity was the Theatre of the Absurd. Its foundation lies in the philosophy of Existentialism and is derived from the works of Camus. Martin Esslin coined this term in the late 1950s. The works of these playwrights agreed with the Existential philosophy that the human situation is essentially absurd and devoid of purpose. Feeling of alienation is seen in these plays and it is almost as if these disillusioned playwrights were questioning the existence of God after the devastation caused by the two World Wars. Theatre of the Absurd does not offer any resolutions. It is circular and each time comes back to where it began. The physical movement of the characters, which might be seen in these plays, does not actually enable the situation to move and that remains static. Critics say that it provokes tears of despair by the laughter of liberation. Esslin said that the absurdist writers drew on a tradition that went back to mime, clowning and nonsense verse, and moreover had contemporary parallels with abstract painting and the French *nouveau roman* (new novel). He defined these plays as 'absurd', because all of the plays emphasized the absurdity of the human condition. Whereas we tend to use the word "absurd" synonymously with "ridiculous," Esslin was referring to the original meaning of the word- 'out of harmony with reason or propriety; illogical'. These plays essentially render man's existence as illogical, and moreover, meaningless. Esslin, however, states that "the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions-and to laugh at it". The absurd dramatists were the first to propagate this idea of acceptance in the face of absurdity.

Albert Camus, at the end of his essay had concluded that, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy". What he meant by that statement is that the struggle of life alone should bring one happiness. Essentially, we can find meaning in living even without knowing why we exist. The absurd dramatists, however, did not resolve the problem of man's meaningless existence quite as positively as Camus. In fact, they typically offered no solution to the problem whatsoever, thus suggesting that the question is ultimately unanswerable. Dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Harold Pinter share this pessimistic vision of humanity struggling vainly to find a purpose.

Samuel Beckett was an Irish playwright and his plays made him one of the most important figures of the Theatre of the Absurd. His existential views manifested in one of the most known works- *Waiting for Godot* (1952). All through the play, the protagonists- Vladimir and Estragon seem to be locked in an existential conundrum as they choose to wait for Godot. The act of waiting makes them gain nothing and their attempts are as futile as real life. Phrases like "Nothing to be done" are repeated constantly in this play to emphasise the pointlessness of life. Thus, he reflects the ideas of absurdity brilliantly in this masterpiece. Beckett subsequently published many more plays, such as *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), and *Happy Days* (1960).

*Endgame* is a play in one act and was originally written by Beckett in French. *Endgame* has four characters: Hamm, the master, who is blind and bound to a wheelchair; Clov, his resentful servant who is physically incapable of sitting down; and Hamm's crippled parents, Nagg and Nell who are confined to trash cans. This play falls into the category of theatre of absurd since it is a despairing play about hopelessness. It is a play where nothing happens and the sense of despair is heightened by the fact that the characters are not waiting for anything other than death in the play. As far as the title is concerned; *Endgame* is a particular move in chess that describes the ending of the chess match where the outcome, which is ultimately death, is already known. This idea is encapsulated in the play's opening line itself, "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished." As its title suggests, the play stages the final moves in a game ending either in checkmate or stalemate. The setting of this play also gives us a sense of claustrophobia and all we see is a bare room. Looking at Nagg and Nell trapped in a garbage can further heightens the claustrophobic sense and all we see is the plight of human beings who appear to be trapped in this conundrum. When Hamm remarks, "Outside of here it's death", there could possibly be a suggestion that the occupants of this room, with one window looking out onto the sea and the other toward land, are the sole survivors of some devastating apocalyptic event.

The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd have no story or plot to speak of, with neither a beginning nor an end. They are cyclical and come back to where they began. They portray a situation in an incomprehensible universe. Similarly, in *Endgame* there isn't a definitive story or plot. The characters are stuck in a meaningless and unchanging world in which they repeat their actions in a ritualistic way. The continual repetitive actions, such as Clov using the ladder and looking out of the window or Hamm calling Clov, may also be an indication of human condition which appears to be extremely futile. In these plays, there is also no recognizable or definable decor, costumes or stage articles. Accordingly in *Endgame*, there is only a bare room with two windows, a door, and a picture; there aren't costumes, a proper setting or decor and critic Stephan Greenblatt says that by doing so Beckett is "denying the audience the comfortable security of a recognizable world".

Another very important characteristic of the theatre of the absurd, that is the function of language. Instead of "witty repartee and pointed dialogue", absurdist plays "often consist of incoherent babblings" (Esslin, 1980). In *Endgame* also, although the characters seem to talk throughout the play, they can't communicate and don't understand what the other person is saying. This is particularly seen in the conversations between Hamm and Clov. Their words do not produce meaning and they find themselves at the point they started. It seems like what they say also doesn't have any significance, just like the world around them. Infact, their conversations are continuously stunted by the fact that whenever one of them says something, it is countered by the other character. Then the first speaker agrees with the argument and the conversation immediately ends.

The fact that the world seemed meaningless and everything was supposed to go to nothingness, is reflected in the plays of the theatre of the absurd. This deadness of the world is made more clear by the specific conversations between Hamm and Clov. As part of their ritual actions, when Hamm asks Clov what he sees outside, he defines everything he sees with words such as 'grey', 'lead' or 'zero'. Clov says that the whole universe is stinking, meaning it has lost all its meaning and everything on it has died out. It seems that life is very painful. Infact, Hamm repeatedly asks Clov for a painkiller, and Clov always answers that the time for it has not yet come, until the end when he informs him, 'There's no more pain-killer'.

thereby suggesting that in this world, it's not possible to escape from the fact that existence is painful and everything is in ruin.

In *Endgame*, Beckett shows suffering to be an unavoidable and constant aspect of human existence. In fact, being alive is equated with misery which we see after Nell's death when Clov looks inside Nagg's bin. He observes, "He's crying." and from this Hamm concludes, "then he's living". Through the use of sardonic humour and laughter the constant suffering of humans is highlighted. Beckett also presents isolation as a core aspect of human existence in *Endgame* by illustrating extensive isolation of the characters. Beckett presents a dismal view of the human condition through the effective use of a variety of literary techniques, thereby making it a typical absurdist play which is characterised by anguish, decay and gradual approach towards the ultimate end- death.

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